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THE OLD ENGLISH BALLAD.

IN his "Germania," the Roman historian, Tacitus, tells us that the ancient Germans had certain songs which they used especially to sing on the eve of battle. Just what the character of these songs was, we are not informed. They were presumably such legendary songs as the lays of the ancient Romans, and formed around the mighty deeds and heroic exploits of their early leaders. Possibly they were of the type of the Anglo-Saxon "Beowulf," a story made up of several shorter songs crystallized around the eponymous hero. Whatever the nature of these songs of which Tacitus speaks, they probably contained the earliest records of the Germanic tribes. Nor were these early legendary songs a peculiarity of the ancient Germans. But, as has been intimated, the ancient Romans and Greeks also possessed similar songs; and they appear, if the historians are correct, to have contained the very earliest historical records of these nations. Livy informs us that these ballads were the sources of early Roman history, and this thesis was defended by the eminent German critic, Niebuhr. When we come to the earliest English historians, we find that they generally drew upon the legendary information in the old English ballads for their facts touching the early history of their own country. Even the critical William of Malmesbury forms no exception to the rule.

These ancient Teutonic ballads were doubtless of heathen origin, and probably contained frequent references to the heathen deities. For this reason they were presumably put under the ban when Christianity was introduced into Germany and into England. The Church would naturally endeavor to wean its followers away from their old pagan practices and superstitions. The old ballads would, therefore, tend to disappear under the progress of Christian civilization. Still, they lingered on for centuries after the nations

were Christianized, so strong a hold did they have upon the affections of the people, very much as our names of the days of the week, which the Church was utterly powerless to expel from the language. Charlemagne, his biographer tells us, had a deep and abiding love for the old ballads of his nation, and with considerable difficulty had a collection of them made; and we read pretty much the same thing of our own good and great king, Alfred.

It will be observed that I seem to use the terms "ballad" and "song" without discrimination. In defense of this laxity of expression I suppose I may plead the somewhat careless practice of the writers upon this subject. The term "ballad" has probably been abused. It is made to include "almost any short narrative poem, any short didactic poem, almost any sort of lyric, and almost every conceivable form of reviling or grumbling in verse." There was no well-defined line drawn between the ballad and the song in Elizabethan literature. "Chevy Chase" is mentioned as a "song" or a "ballad" indifferently. Again, the term "ballad" was so elastic during that period as to apply to the "Songs of Solomon," which in the "Bishop's Bible" is called "The Ballet of Ballets." Another contemporary translation of this book is entitled "The Canticles or Balades of Solomon." Ritson, in his "Historical Essay on the Origin and Progress of National Song," defined the ballad thus: "With us, songs of sentiment, expression, or even description, are properly termed Songs, in contradistinction to mere narrative compositions, which we now denominate Ballads.' This brief paper is concerned not with modern songs of individual authorship but, as has already been implied in the opening paragraph, with the old popular ballads of the English people, which set forth in narrative the legends and traditions of that race.

Various theories have been held by modern scholars as to the origin of the popular ballad. Some have maintained the theory of a native and original Germanic beast-epos; others that the old ballads have developed from the ancient Germanic and Aryan myths; while still others have defended

the theory of self-production. Each of these theories has had its ardent supporters, but at present the first two are not seriously entertained by scholars as a class. The third view, that of self-production, seems to have more to commend it to favorable consideration. According to this theory, the ballad is the product of the people as a whole, and is not made by any individual genius. For this reason it is denominated by some "communal poetry." But as to the manner by which a poem can be created without first originating in the mind of some individual poet, the advocates of this theory are not so clear as might be desired. They claim that the popular ballad is the product of the Universal Mind, whatever that may signify. It is the "outcome and the expression of a whole community, and this community must be homogeneous—must belong to a time when, in a common atmosphere of ignorance, so far as book lore is concerned, one habit of thought and one standard of action animate every member from prince to plowboy."

This problem of the origin of communal poetry has given rise to two different schools of interpreters. One school holds that the people, the community as a unit, makes the ballad, which they maintain is the poetry of nature, not of art; and that there is nothing subjective about it. The other school holds the theory of individual authorship and claims that the ballad is the poetry of art, not of nature; and further, they admit that the finished poem of the artist is subjected to oral transmission and is, consequently, modified to a greater or less extent by such transmission. Among those of the former class may be mentioned Sir Walter Scott, Motherwell, and several German critics including the Grimms, Uhland, Ten Brink and Grundtvig. Of the latter, now the larger school, who hold the view of individual authorship, are such German critics as Wolf, Paul, and Scherer. Both schools, however, agree that the ballad is the poetry of an unlettered people, and that learning is the foe of the ballad, that the two cannot exist side by side. The primitive popular ballad must therefore be the product of an unlettered age, and cannot coexist with learning and culture. Civiliza-

tion and Christianity force the ballad to retire and ultimately to disappear from among the people.

But communal authorship, as the term is used here, does not mean the same thing as the term ordinarily denotes. Says Prof. Gummere, in the introduction to his "*Old English Ballads*," in explanation of the term: "Solitary composition would have been as hard for primitive man to understand as communal authorship is hard for us. Poetry was a common possession; 'there was no production,' to quote Ten Brink's admirable phrase, 'but reproduction.' There were variations, additions—spontaneous and free; but no composition, no originality, as we mean the term. In a sense, too, their song had neither beginning nor end; it was taken up and put down, but never definitely bounded; as they knew neither writer nor writing, so they knew nothing of the literary unit, the poem in and for itself. All was in flux; out of a common store of tradition, by a spontaneous and universal movement, song rose and fell according to the needs of the community."

"Now when Grimm bids one think of a race composing songs, one keeps in mind the modern way of composition, and therefore calls the phrase nebulous or silly. From such a point of view it is nebulous; but while one is inclined under any circumstances to reject it in its bare and dogmatic form, there is a measure of truth in it if one renounces all notion of modern authorship. 'Let one fancy,' says Ten Brink, 'an epoch where the same culture, the same sentiment, the same expressions, are property of a whole community; . . . an epoch where a poem comes to the ears of the listener in the very moment which gives it form, and, treasured in memory, does not live again until it is delivered again by the voice. Fancy a poetry oscillating perpetually between reminiscence and improvisation.' If this is true of an age dominated largely by the minstrel, what shall be said for prehistoric times? The singer is agent at once of preservation and of destruction, for he rescues specimens of a type which his incipient artistry is bound to destroy. Hence the absurdity of trying to discover in any published ballad the

absolutely impersonal quality of poetry of the people. Successive triumphs of culture involved a series of steps by which the artist came into prominence and was made welcome by a public; as his note grows more insistent, less and less importance attaches to the communal elements of poetry: singing, dancing, refrain, and improvisation. Reverse this course of development; singing and dancing become obligatory, the scope of the refrain widens more and more, improvisation, varying with memory, is a necessity; and we have thus, by steps legitimate in every way, taken our narrative ballad back to a communal origin, and removed it from the conditions of individual authorship."

What, then, were the supposed characteristics of the primitive popular ballad? The critics tell us that it possessed the communal elements of poetry, such as improvisation and refrain, and that its delivery was attended with singing and dancing. Moreover, the primitive ballad lacked the subjective element; there was nothing of the *ego* in its composition, no trace of a personality. It had no reflective element, and bears no evidence of being an artistic product. On the other hand, it possessed naïveté, spontaneity, and, above all, simplicity of speech and thought. Its language was absolutely barren of figurative expression. But it abounded in iteration—oft-recurring phrases. As Wolf says, "It has living erratic narrative, full of leapings and omissions, sudden changes from narrative to dialogue, no ornamentation, the art of making with few strokes a vigorous sketch of events and situations." These, then, according to the critics, are some of the distinctive features of the primitive ballads of the people.

To speak now more particularly of the ballads of our own tongue. The English ballads which have come down to us do not seem to date very far back, possibly to the fourteenth century. Most of them, however, are of the sixteenth century. Ritson referred the origin of our ballads to the reign of Queen Elizabeth. But these are not, of course, the primitive ballads of the Angles and Saxons. None of these have been preserved to us. The ballads which we have are

doubtless of individual authorship, and in some cases the author may be known. But generally the author's name has long since perished. Our ballads were composed and then thrown to the public, who took them up and handed them down by oral transmission, from generation to generation, till finally they were fixed in print. Their ever-varying form then became stereotyped once for all. Some of these ballads, in one form or another, may date back centuries before the invention of printing, and continued to linger on even into modern times as a popular heritage from a far remote antiquity. Generally speaking, however, the old ballads began to disappear when learning began to be diffused throughout the people and modern literature began to develop. When Chaucer, the father of English poetry, began to sing, he sounded the death knell of the old ballad. Not that the ballad immediately disappeared, or ceased at once to be held in popular esteem. It lingered on for a century or more; but its hold upon the public was gradually weakening, and its influence was waning.

Many of the old ballads preserved to us show traces of amalgamation. That is to say, they are not an independent and distinct literary unit, but represent a fusion of several similar ballads dealing with the same hero or subject. They are the resulting product of the mingling of different legends. Moreover, these legends are not always of the same country. They may be from different countries and of different dates; and yet, though diverse in origin and local coloring, they are sometimes blended into a new legend with an altered setting. A striking situation in one ballad, for example, may be introduced into another ballad, thus producing almost endless variations of an original ballad. Again, the entire setting of a theme may be transferred from one ballad to another. Such are some of the ways in which an original ballad may give rise to numerous variations; and actual examples illustrating each of these methods might be cited from our own old ballads, if one were to take the time to compare and study the valuable collection made by Prof. Child. It is doubtless in this manner that we are to explain

the cycle of ballads which grew up around the name of that famous traditionary outlaw, Robin Hood. Such modifications of the original ballad, thus giving rise to a cycle, are probably produced by the people, or by the minstrel, or by the artist who commits the ballad to paper.

The ballad was of course sung. It was sung by the minstrel, who commanded the respect and esteem of prince and peasant alike among the ancient Germans and Britons. The minstrel not only sang, but often improvised as he entertained the people, so that he was both musician and poet. Nor did his art end here. For he sometimes acted, going through a course of gestures, more or less graceful, in order to contribute still farther to the entertainment of his host. Minstrels were maintained at the courts of kings, who provided handsomely for their material welfare. But there were also traveling minstrels, who, not being permanently connected with any royal household, traveled from court to court. Especially was this the case in Germany during the Middle Ages. We are familiar with the history of Walther von der Vogelweide, who as a minnesinger used to travel about Germany, visiting the various petty princes, till finally he was given a home by the Duke of Bavaria. The name of Neidhart von Reuenthal will also doubtless occur to the reader as that of another famous German minnesinger.

But these two German traveling singers were above the rank of the average minstrel. For they composed their own songs, which have come down to us as the finest specimens of the Middle-High-German lyric poetry, and were not content simply to sing the lyrics of others. We also read, to cite a case from England, that Alfred the Great, when his kingdom was invaded by the harassing Danes who actually drove him from his throne, himself assumed the guise of a minstrel and entered the Danish camp where he sang and played, in order to obtain accurate information in regard to his enemy. Among the Danes, as this incident leads us to infer, the office of the minstrel is said to have been held in the very highest repute and honor, and his person was even regarded sacred. They called the minstrel "scald," and

considered him little less than divine. But the "scald" was not simply a minstrel; he was also a poet. The Anglo-Saxons probably had the same character among them, and designated him by the term "scop." At least, such an inference seems warranted from the familiar story of Cædmon, the first Christian poet among our forefathers. But the office of the minstrel seems to have fallen into desuetude in England during the latter part of the Middle Ages. The progress of civilization must have dealt severely with minstrelsy.

However, the old popular songs, the ballads, lingered among the people, though they were gradually disappearing, till Bishop Percy, in 1765, published his epoch-making "*Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*." He thus placed the English people under lasting obligation to him for preserving a species of literature that was fast fading out of memory, and aroused in his contemporaries an interest in a feature of their national life—to wit, the minstrel's art—which in his day was extinct. This book of old ballads had the wonderful effect of reviving a deep and appreciative interest in the romantic past of the national history. Men now began to write narrative ballads in imitation of the genuine old ballads. The interest in these was almost all-absorbing. It was about this time that Macpherson published his "*Ossian*," which purported to be a translation of certain old Gaelic epic poems. It was about this time, also, that Chatterton, the "marvelous boy," whose brief life with its tragic end appealed so forcibly to Coleridge and Keats, offered to the public his "*Death of Sir Charles Bawdin*," written by a fictitious monk, Thomas Rowley. These "*Rowley Poems*" purported to be copied from a mysterious mediæval parchment which Chatterton found in the muniment room of Redcliffe church. They were, in point of fact, poetic forgeries of the boy's own creation. Written with some cleverness, but with a profound ignorance of the forms of earlier English, in imitation of the old narrative ballad, these poetic forgeries produced considerable discussion and were enthusiastically accepted as genuine old English ballads by many scholars

of that day, themselves totally unacquainted with Middle English. The ballad fever continued without much abatement till the end of the century, when the "Wizard of the North," himself inoculated with the virus, made a translation of Bürger's ballads and in 1802 published a collection of Scotch border ballads, which he entitled the "Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border." So great was Scott's enthusiasm over Percy's collection of old ballads that, as Lockhart relates, he said concerning the book: "The first time I could scrape a few shillings together, which were not common occurrences with me, I bought unto myself a copy of the beloved volumes; nor do I believe I ever read a book half so frequently, or with half the enthusiasm."

The collection of the old ballads by Bishop Percy, it may be said in passing, was by no means complete. Indeed, it contained only about one-sixth of the contents of his folio manuscript, now in the British Museum, and this collection was of course not exhaustive. The entire manuscript was edited in 1868 by Hales and Furnivall and given to the public. Another collection of ballads was brought out at the close of the last century by Joseph Ritson. But, not to give a bibliography of the old English ballad, which is aside from the purpose of this brief paper, let it suffice to mention Prof. Child's monumental collection of "English and Scottish Ballads," which was first published in 1857-59, and in a final edition *de luxe* form (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co.), giving the results of a life work, before his death in 1896.

The old ballads are interesting as showing a species of English literature now extinct. They are interesting, further, because they reflect the feelings and sentiments of our people in a far by-gone age, and reflect them as the other lyrics and poetry of those times do not. They show the crude, unlettered verse which during the period concerned entertained the great English folk. In these old ballads we find a wide range of sentiments expressed. Some of them are gentle and submissive in tone; others are vindictive, bold, and defiant. Some have a joyous, exultant note;

others exhibit a sad and tragic coloring and breathe a deeply pathetic spirit. Others again, such as "Sweet William's Ghost," or the "Wife of Usher's Well," to cite concrete examples, are as weird, uncanny, and harrowing as Poe's grotesque, morbid tales. There are some to suit all moods since they run through the whole gamut of human emotion. It would be interesting to add a few specimens for illustration, but this would transcend the limit of our space, and we must content ourselves with this imperfect and inadequate sketch.

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